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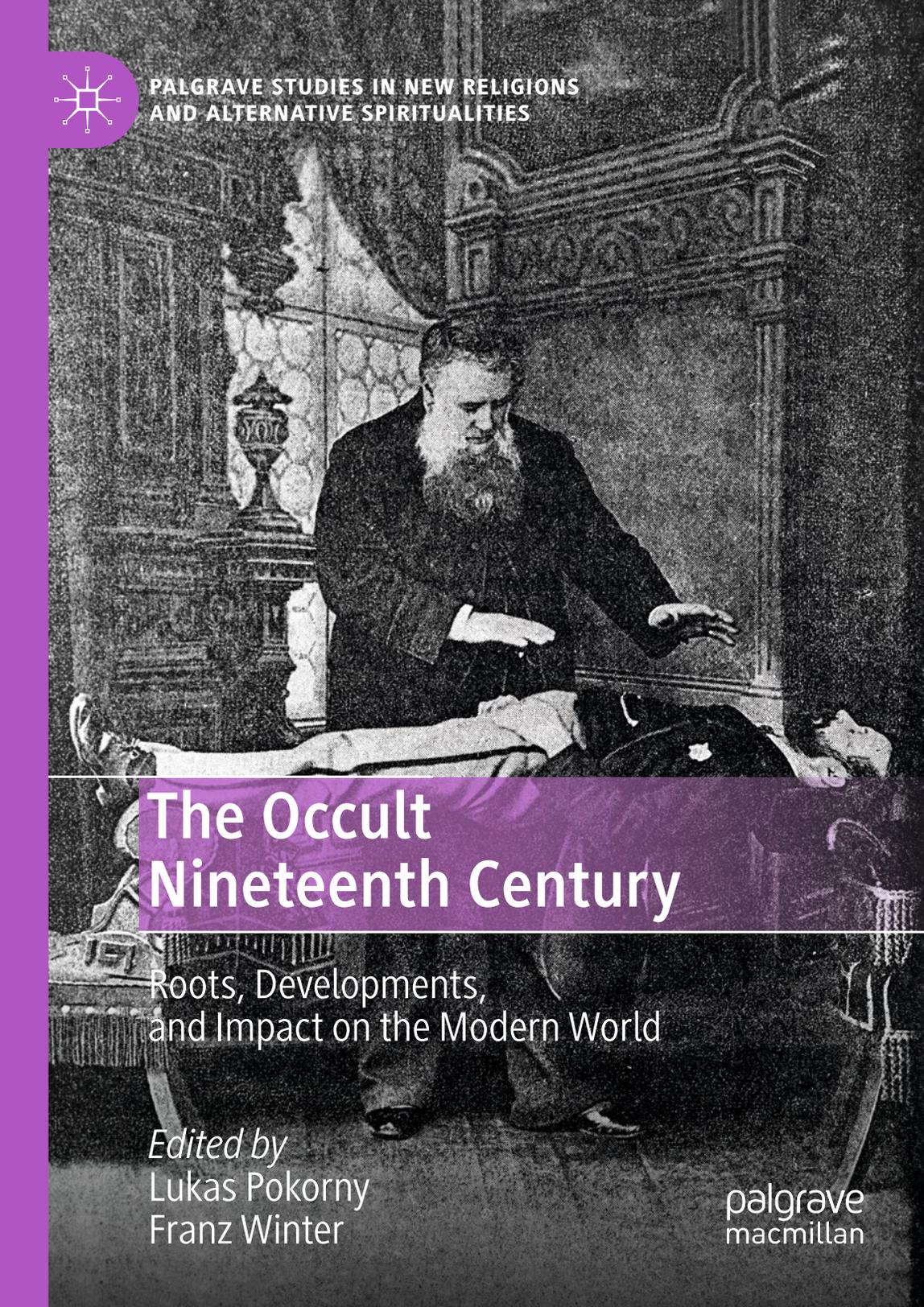
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The Occult Nineteenth Century

Roots, Developments,
and Impact on the Modern World

Edited by
Lukas Pokorny
Franz Winter

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CHAPTER 8

The Art of Esoteric Posthumousness

Marco Pasi

*Men have always been expected to cut their coat according to their cloth,
they learnt to do so, but their wishes and dreams did not comply. Here
almost all men are future, rise above the life that has been
granted them.*

—Bloch (1986: 1365).

In 1970 the Finnish scholar Sixten Ringbom (1935–1992) published a book titled *The Sounding Cosmos* (Ringbom 1970), which was the first scholarly book to seriously examine the esoteric interests of a protagonist of the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, namely Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944).¹ This book showed to what extent the invention of abstraction as a new form of art was related to the influence of esoteric ideas. It generated a broad discussion and opened the way to further

¹The book was preceded by an important article: Ringbom (1966).

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researches in the same direction.² Those researches were the basis for the ground-breaking exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, curated by Maurice Tuchman (b. 1936) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986.³

Since Ringbom's book and Tuchman's exhibition, a lot has happened concerning the relationship between alternative spirituality and modern art. Important books and essays have been published, major retrospective exhibitions have been held, and large research projects—such as “Enchanted Modernities”—have been supported by institutional funding agencies. Although there may still be differences of opinion as to the extent of the influence of esoteric movements—such as Theosophy and Anthroposophy—on the origins of abstract art or on the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, it would be difficult for an art historian today to deny that such an influence existed at all.

ESOTERIC POSTHUMOUSNESS

An important exhibition held between 2018 and 2019 at the Lenbachhaus art gallery in Munich, entitled *World Receivers*, has shown once again how the development of modern art cannot be properly understood without considering its esoteric dimension.⁴ The exhibition focused mainly on three women artists who were deeply influenced by esoteric ideas: Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884), Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), and Emma Kunz (1892–1963). These three artists developed, each in her own time, an abstract, non-figurative, a-mimetic style independently from the male-dominated world of artistic modernism.⁵ The title of the exhibition, *World Receivers* (*Weltempfänger*), refers to their particular sensitivity, their ability to pick up the signals from another world and translate them into an extraordinarily innovative and original pictorial language.

One of the qualities that I find most intriguing in the art of these three artists is what I call “posthumousness,” which I define as “the inability or unwillingness to have one's [artistic] work promoted and recognised

² On the history of the book and its influence, see Introvigne (2018).

³ See the catalogue: Tuchman (1986).

⁴ The exhibition “World Receivers—Weltempfänger” was held between 6 November 2018 and 10 March 2019 in the Kunstbau space of the Lenbachhaus gallery. For the catalogue, see Althaus et al. (2018).

⁵ On the pre-history of abstraction, also with an attention to possible connections to esoteric ideas, see the catalogue of an important exhibition: Rosenberg and Hollein (2007).

during one's life, which projects the work into a temporal limbo [of obscurity] that may last decades or even forever" (Pasi 2015: 113). However, posthumousness is meaningful for us only when such work possesses an aesthetic quality or energy that is able to challenge neglect and oblivion—sometimes subtly and gradually, sometimes suddenly and dramatically. This eventually leads to recognition and canonisation. Then, there is usually a sense of wonder: How were we able to ignore this work until now? How could it remain into obscurity for so long?

The paradigmatic case for posthumousness in modern art is Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). But, important as he is in the canon of modern art, van Gogh's example is less relevant here, because I would rather like to focus on cases where posthumousness gets mixed with a deep interest in alternative spirituality, mysticism, and esoteric doctrines or practices. This is not so much the case with van Gogh, but it is indeed so with the artists included in the *World Receivers* exhibition.

The relationship between posthumousness and alternative spirituality is probably not purely accidental, but points to some interesting patterns. There is a long list of artists influenced by esotericism to whom the concept of posthumousness can be clearly applied. For some, recognition is already a matter of fact—in some cases even spectacularly so, as is obviously the case with Houghton, af Klint, and Kunz. For others, it is likely to be coming soon enough, or may have to wait some more time. I could mention a few examples: Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962),⁶ Aleister

⁶The daughter of an upper-class Dutch family established in London, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn moved to Monte Verità, near Ascona, Switzerland, in the 1920s and became a leading personality in the community of spiritually-oriented persons living there at the time. Along with Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), she was instrumental in the creation of the famous series of interdisciplinary conferences, the *Eranos Tagungen*, that were so important for defining a certain approach to the study of religion and spirituality. Over the years, she created an extremely interesting oeuvre of graphical, abstract works based on esoteric symbolism, which have rarely received the attention they deserve from art critics. These works can now be seen in the Casa Anatta Museum on Monte Verità. I am not aware of a monograph or major exhibition devoted to her artistic work. A recent rise of interest has been generated by the collective exhibition curated in 2016 by Massimiliano Gioni at the New Museum in New York, entitled 'The Keeper', which included some of her drawings. For the catalogue, see Gioni and Bell (2016), especially pp. 142–149. On the history of Eranos, with frequent references to Fröbe-Kapteyn and her crucial role therein, see Hakl (2013) and Bernardini (2011).

Crowley (1875–1947);⁷ Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988);⁸ and Luigi Pericle (1916–2001).⁹

Pericle, an artist deeply influenced by alternative spirituality, has been rediscovered only recently and his posthumous recognition is now growing fast. A large retrospective exhibition, the first since his death, was held in 2019 at the Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice and received quite some attention from the press.¹⁰ Pericle's case is particularly interesting. After making a fortune in the 1950s as the creator of the cartoon character "Max the Hamster," he decided to devote himself entirely to painting. In the early 1960s, his new career as an artist took off quite rapidly with a number of important exhibitions, thanks particularly to the support of influential critics, gallerists, and collectors. His work was deeply influenced by his interest in alternative spirituality and Asian religious traditions. But, at the end of the 1960s, he went through a personal crisis and decided to disappear completely from the world of art. He lived the rest of his life in relative isolation in his house on Monte Verità, in the Swiss canton of Ticino. Nonetheless, he silently continued to create his art. When he died in 2001 he was practically forgotten, and it is only a few years ago that the immense body of work that he left behind in his house was rediscovered.

⁷ I co-curated, together with Giuseppe Di Liberti and Alessandra Sandrolini, an exhibition of Aleister Crowley's newly found paintings in 2008 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, which was connected to the broader exhibition 'Traces du sacré', curated by Jean de Loisy and Angela Lampe at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in the same year. For the catalogue, see Pasi (2008). See also the English version of my essay from the catalogue: Pasi (2013).

⁸ Ithell Colquhoun was a practicing occultist, author of several books and essays, and painter. She had a brief but intense connection to the surrealist movement in Great Britain in the late 1930s but was unable or unwilling to secure long-lasting recognition for herself as an artist. Her work is still waiting to be appreciated outside of a small (but ever-growing) circle of connoisseurs. This will happen at some point, considering also that the major collection of her artistic works has been transferred by the National Trust, which previously owned it, to the Tate Gallery. For an introduction to her life and work, see Ferentinou (2017), Ratcliffe (2007), and Hale (2020).

⁹ For an introduction to Luigi Pericle, see Biasca-Caroni and Biasca-Caroni (2018).

¹⁰ The exhibition was curated by Chiara Gatti. For the catalogue, see Gatti et al. (2019).

THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL VALUE OF POSTHUMOUSNESS

It is evident that, depending on particular biographical and psychological circumstances, posthumousness can find itself closely associated with the world of creativity. And yet it has not been really explored as a phenomenon in its own right. It is obviously not one that we can observe only in the visual arts, although this is my main focus in this chapter. In fact, posthumousness—and more particularly esoteric posthumousness—can easily be found in other fields of creativity, such as literature (e.g., the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa [1888–1935] with his famous trunk of posthumous papers) or music (the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi [1905–1988]).¹¹ And, in some of these cases, posthumousness itself becomes an object of critical reflection for the artist, as is the case with Pessoa, who devotes many (posthumous) pages to the problem of celebrity and artistic recognition (Pessoa 2000).

An aspect that I find particularly interesting about posthumousness is the way in which it irritates and is antithetical to some basic ideological presuppositions of liberal capitalist societies, such as the affirmation of individuality and personal success. Insofar as these ideologies influence the system of contemporary art, posthumousness appears to be at odds with the latter as well.¹² Clearly, posthumousness is the opposite of what the system of art wants from artists today. An artist is expected to be not just a creator but also a manager, an entrepreneur, if not even an impresario of him- or herself.¹³ In other words, to strive for living success, not for posthumous recognition.

Whereas this kind of pressure is undeniably an aspect of the art establishment, it is interesting to see how artists may react against it. An interesting case here is the contemporary American artist Cady Noland (b. 1956), who had considerable success in the 1980s and the early 1990s, even setting a record for the highest price paid for an artwork by a living

¹¹I had already made a comparison between Hilma af Klint, Georgiana Houghton, Fernando Pessoa and Giacinto Scelsi—also briefly touching on their shared quality of posthumousness—in Pasi (2015).

¹²For my understanding of the system of contemporary art, see Pasi (2019).

¹³For an interesting reflection on how contemporary artists are increasingly perceived as and expected to be ‘creative entrepreneurs’, see Deresiewicz (2015).

female artist.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, the role of celebrity in contemporary American society was one of the major themes of her work. After 1995 she decided to stop having personal exhibitions of her works and practically disappeared from the art scene, even committing the ultimate sin of disavowing some of her earlier works, which made some of the collectors who paid millions for those works react angrily to the point of bringing her to court (Gilbert 2015). So here, similarly to the case of Pericle, we have a successful artist who at some point tries his or her best to reject recognition and intentionally construct his or her own posthumousness.

Esoteric Posthumousness: Types and Motivations

If we reflect on the artists I have mentioned, and more particularly on the three women artists featured in the Lenbachhaus exhibition, I think we can see some patterns emerge. First of all, there seem to be two main types of posthumousness: (1) an inability to function within the art system; and (2) a lack of interest in, or a rejection of, the art system. In both cases the result is the same: an artist who has enough talent and originality to be recognised by the art establishment, and who can have personal success, finds him- or herself in a situation of relative obscurity, which lasts until the moment of his or her death and can continue indefinitely afterwards. However, the two cases are also different. In the first one there may be a desire to enjoy artistic fame, but this desire, for whatever reason, is frustrated and cannot be fulfilled. In the second one, there is apparently no desire to be part of the artistic establishment and achieve personal success.

If we look closer at the latter instance (posthumousness as an apparent choice of the artist), and we place it within the context of esotericism, we realise that there may be at least three different motivations for esoteric posthumousness. First, this choice is perceived by the artist as dictated, or even imposed, by some spiritual authority. This could be a preter-human entity from another level of existence, but it could also be a spiritual master living in this world. This is for instance, as we will see, the role Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) seems to play with Hilma af Klint at a certain point

¹⁴The work of Cady Noland has been shown between October 2018 and May 2019 in a large retrospective exhibition at the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt. This was her first solo exhibition in many years. On the exhibition and more generally on the artist and her work, see the booklet published for the occasion (Pfeffer 2018). See also the important essay by her friend and fellow artist Steven Parrino (2005).

in her life. Second, the fruition of the artist's work seems to be projected into the future. The artist believes that the world is not presently ready or mature enough for the spiritual message conveyed through this artistic work. Subjectively, this could explain why attempts to exhibit the work would not be successful, even if the artist wanted to make attempts in that direction. Third, there might be a lack of interest from the part of the artist for any material or mundane gain that might be achieved through an art considered to be inherently spiritual. In this case any compromise between the spiritual and the commercial value of an artwork would be implicitly or explicitly rejected.

A Comparative Analysis of Posthumous Esoteric Artists

Let us see now how we can relate some of these types and motivations to the concrete cases of artists inspired by esoteric ideas. In order to do so, I will focus on the examples of the three "posthumous" artists included in the aforementioned Lenbachhaus exhibition: Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint, and Emma Kunz. How do they fit into this rather abstract scheme of types and motivations? A comparison between them will offer, I believe, some interesting answers to this question.

All three artists have much in common.¹⁵ First of all, they claimed to be receiving their art from spiritual sources that go beyond their limited selves and their personal creativity. Second, they perceived the value of their work as being not primarily aesthetic or artistic, but spiritual. Third, the fact of being women put them, in the context in which they lived, in a disadvantaged position with respect to the public recognition of the artistic quality of their work. These are the most significant similarities between the three. But there are also important differences.

Let us begin with Georgiana Houghton.¹⁶ Like the other two, Houghton claims to receive her works from spiritual sources. These are identified as the spirits of deceased persons, who in some cases have achieved a high spiritual status and have become angels. We are here in the specific context of mid-nineteenth century spiritualism, before the foundation of the Theosophical Society and the development of other forms of

¹⁵These commonalities are of course highlighted in the catalogue of the Lenbachhaus exhibition. See in particular the essay by one of the curators (Althaus 2018).

¹⁶On Houghton, see Grant et al. (2016), Oberter (2006 and 2007), Atkinson (2005), and Gibbons (1988).

occultism.¹⁷ Starting especially from the 1880s, these new forms would visibly influence the cultural landscape of Europe and be significant not only for Hilma af Klint, but also for many other modern artists at the turn and in the early decades of the twentieth century.

What makes Houghton different from af Klint and Kunz is the fact that, although she attributed a deep spiritual meaning to her drawings, she also tried to make her work visible in a more conventional artistic context by organising a personal exhibition in a commercial gallery in London in 1871. She paid the costs of the exhibition herself, which she hoped to partly cover by selling the exhibited works, but in the end the plan turned out to be a failure, at least from a financial point of view (Grant and Pasi 2016: 18–20).

Here we see some interesting differences, because the very attempt by Houghton to showcase her spiritual work in a secular art context brings her closer to the first type of posthumousness (i.e., posthumousness as an inability rather than as a choice). Af Klint and Kunz never seem to have made a similar attempt, and would therefore be closer to the second type. Whereas the spiritual quality of af Klint's and Kunz's works seems to have prevented a desire to have it acknowledged and appreciated in a non-spiritual artistic context, this was not the case with Houghton, even if her attempt was eventually unsuccessful.

Let us turn now to af Klint.¹⁸ Even more clearly than Houghton, she received a formal training as an artist.¹⁹ With her, we find ourselves in a context where Theosophy, and later Anthroposophy, offered additional sources of inspiration apart from spiritualism. In fact, af Klint, initially as a member of a group of spiritualist women (“The Five”), received spiritual

¹⁷For a conceptualisation of nineteenth century occultism, including its distinction from spiritualism, see Pasi (2005).

¹⁸On af Klint, see now the important book-length biography that has been recently published: Voss (2020). For the rest, there is a growing literature on af Klint, which is based primarily (but not exclusively) on the catalogues of the important exhibitions of her works held in recent years: Bashkoff (2018), Birnbaum et al. (2016), Müller-Westermann and Widoff (2013), *Hilma af Klint* (2008), Hutchinson (2005). Also important are the following collections of essays, published in connection to some of these exhibitions: Almqvist and Belfrage (2015, 2017, and 2019). Finally, it is important to mention the reproduction and English translation of a selection of af Klint's notebooks in Burgin (2018).

¹⁹Af Klint was admitted as a student to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm in 1882 and completed her studies in 1887 (see Müller-Westermann 2013: 37; *Hilma af Klint* 2008: 37). Women were accepted as students at the Academy only since 1864 (see Svensson 2005: 14).

and artistic guidance from higher beings who resemble more the Theosophical Masters or Mahatmas than the simple spirits of deceased persons.²⁰ She was “commissioned” by them to produce a large number of paintings that would then be displayed in a “Temple.” This is why the paintings belonging to this vast cycle, subdivided into several “series,” are usually referred to as the “Paintings for the Temple.” This was part of a grand cosmic plan, because the paintings would be a crucial instrument for the imminent revelation of spiritual truths to humanity. There was also a sense of urgency in their communications to af Klint: the task had to be accomplished before a certain time.²¹ The idea that these paintings would be shown to the public seemed therefore to be part of the plan from the beginning. This, however, should not happen in a secular context, but rather in a religious one, because this would be the only appropriate one to their primary—or perhaps even only—purpose.

It is important to consider that the High Masters forbade af Klint to show the paintings before the whole work was completed. Showing the paintings at the end of the process was part of the plan, because this was the manner they could fulfil their role in the Masters’ grand spiritual scheme. But the moment when this would actually happen was projected into the future. Yet, even when af Klint had the feeling that the whole cycle of spiritual paintings had been completed, in December 1915, she still did not try to show them, at least for quite some time. Why?

Her meeting with another esoteric master—this time an incarnate one—has been deemed crucial by most critics. In 1908 Rudolf Steiner, then lecturing in Stockholm, was invited by af Klint to visit her studio and see some of her paintings. It appears that he was not particularly impressed by them and was particularly critical about the mediumistic methods af Klint had used in order to produce them (Svensson 2005: 28–29; Voss 2019: 24). Af Klint, who hoped to receive encouragement and appreciation from one of the most charismatic and influential figures of the European esoteric scene at the time, was most probably disheartened by this and in fact even stopped painting for a number of years.

²⁰ In a passage in one of her notebooks, af Klint calls them “High Lords of the Mysteries” (quoted in Svensson 2005: 19). On “The Five” group and af Klint’s involvement in it, see Müller-Westermann (2013: 41).

²¹ See for instance the communication from the Masters dated 11 January 1907 and reported by af Klint in her note book: “There is little time and much work that lies before you. The High Masters intend to build a temple in the world. You have been given the task of producing drawings for the space of three years” (af Klint 2005: 64).

Although her interest in Steiner, and later Anthroposophy, remained high for the rest of her life, we have to assume that Steiner's lack of enthusiasm made her somewhat insecure about her whole project and therefore also about the necessity of showing her spiritual works to a large public. Furthermore, it is well known that when af Klint died, in 1944, she left a testament in which she instructed her heirs not to show her paintings publicly for 20 years after her death (Svensson 2005: 29). This can be easily understood as being related to the second motivation for esoteric posthumousness: namely the idea that the world is not yet ready for the spiritual message conveyed through the artworks.

However, this would be only a partial image of the story. There is some clear evidence that, more than ten years after the completion of the large cycle of her spiritual paintings, af Klint made attempts at exhibiting them, always in an Anthroposophical context. One was made in Amsterdam in 1927, where an international conference of Anthroposophists was scheduled to take place, but it led to nothing. A second attempt, recently discovered by art historian and af Klint biographer Julia Voss (b. 1974), was more successful. On that occasion, af Klint was able to show a small selection of her spiritual paintings at an Anthroposophical convention that took place in London in 1928 (Voss 2019: 24–28).

These attempts, and their result, are no doubt significant. They relativise a certain image of af Klint as an artist who led a secluded life and was uncompromisingly secretive about her spiritual works. But if we compare these attempts with Houghton's 1871 exhibition, we notice at least one important difference. Af Klint was certainly well connected to the art establishment through her period spent at the Academy of Fine Arts as a student and her continuous work as a conventional figurative artist, both before and after her graduation. However, we do not know of any attempt made by her to exhibit her spiritual paintings in a context other than the Anthroposophical one. One could say that the venues of Anthroposophical conventions would offer the most appropriate environment for the appreciation of their spiritual message—short of a “Temple” where she could show the paintings, as had been promised by the High Masters. Much more visibly than in Houghton's case, the spiritual quality of af Klint's works seems therefore to predetermine the context for their fruition.

We could reverse the argument with respect to Houghton. She was clearly well connected to London's spiritualist milieu, and it would have

been easy for her to exhibit her drawings in a spiritualist context.²² Instead, she chose to rent a commercial gallery and show them there. The implication seems to be that she was also more confident in the artistic value of the works, apart from their spiritual quality. This does not necessarily mean that she disassociated the two. There are good reasons to believe that the spiritual message of the works was as important to Houghton as it was to af Klint. We may perhaps suppose that Houghton's greater openness towards a secular, non-esoteric exhibition space was based on the idea that this kind of space would allow her to reach out to a broader audience, therefore, increasing the chances for the works to convey their spiritual message. This point would still be relevant today, precisely as the spiritual works of these artists are exhibited in the predominantly secular context of art museums and galleries. It might feel reassuring for a contemporary art curator to know that exhibiting artworks created with a spiritual purpose in a wholly secular context would not necessarily betray the original intention of the artist.²³

Let us now turn to Emma Kunz.²⁴ As for Houghton and af Klint, also for Kunz there is the idea that the meaning of her art could not really be understood by her contemporaries. In fact, she has been reported as saying: "A time will come when my pictures will be understood"; and: "My pictures are for the twenty-first century" (quoted in Meier 1998b: 28; see also p. 19 for another similar statement). At the same time, of the three artists examined here, Kunz was the least connected to the secular art establishment of her time, although she lived for a long time as a housekeeper with the family of the Swiss artist and art critic Jacob Friedrich Welti (1871–1952). Not only she never had a formal artistic training (unlike Houghton and af Klint), but she also did not seem to be interested in the very idea of exhibiting her works, either in a spiritual or in any other context.

²²About Houghton's prominent position in the British spiritualist movement of her time, see Grant and Pasi (2016: 11).

²³Not every art curator would necessarily agree that the original intentions of the artist should determine the way in which an artwork is displayed or presented today, but my personal experience of the contemporary art world leads me to believe that most curators would consider it at least an ethical question with which to grapple at some point in the preparation of an exhibition project.

²⁴The main source of information on Kunz's life and work is Meier (1998a). See also the catalogue of the important 2019 exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London: Blanchflower and Grabowska (2019).

Another important difference is that, unlike Houghton and af Klint, Kunz does not seem to have been in contact with or directly guided by spirits. She was rather using a pendulum in the creation of her works, and the whole process presents some similarities to the one commonly used with the Chinese divination system of the *Yijing*. At the beginning there would be the formulation of a particular question from a person who would consult Kunz as a healer and seer. This would usually be related to health or other personal issues. The pendulum would then indicate particular points on a surface. When connected, these points would construct a visual diagram that would offer, through correct interpretation, the answer to the original question (Meier 1998b: 28). Kunz's works are therefore mostly diagrams that were constructed for this particular purpose, although they were given by their author a broader spiritual significance that exceeded the original circumstances of their creation. Interestingly, this brings Kunz closer to another posthumous esoteric artist who was close enough both temporally and geographically to her, and whom I have already mentioned: Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn.²⁵ And, together with Fröbe-Kapteyn, it is easy to think also of Carl Gustav Jung, with whom she was associated for the organisation of the famous Eranos conferences.²⁶

Jung is another extraordinary example of artistic esoteric posthumousness. Whereas his major role in the history of modern psychology is far from being posthumous and was already widely acknowledged while he was still alive, a few years ago another aspect of his personality was revealed that had been virtually unknown until then. This was his artistic side, which became visible through the discovery and publication of his *Red Book* (Jung 2009) leading to new interpretations of his work as a whole.²⁷ This side of Jung's personality appears to be close to that of artists such as Houghton, af Klint, and Kunz. The fact that both Jung's *Red Book* and af Klint's paintings were included in the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale curated by Massimiliano Gioni (b. 1973) in 2013 is a clear

²⁵ It is not surprising to see that the famous art critic and curator Harald Szeemann (1933–2005), who was deeply interested in the spiritual and cultural underground of the twentieth century and devoted a ground-breaking exhibition to Monte Verità, was well aware of both Fröbe-Kapteyn's and Kunz's artistic works. He included a biographical profile of Fröbe-Kapteyn in the catalogue of his famous exhibition devoted to Monte Verità (see Rosenbaum-Kroeber 1978) and wrote a long essay on Kunz (see Szeemann 1998).

²⁶ See above, n. 7.

²⁷ On the artistic side of Jung's work, see *The Foundation of the Works of C.G. Jung* (2018).

indication of this newly discovered affinity and of the inclusion of their approach in a new canon of modern artistic creativity.

Returning to the three artists I have been discussing, there are some other interesting differences between Houghton and af Klint on the one hand, and Kunz on the other. With Houghton and af Klint we have a grand spiritual vision that justifies the production of the artworks but goes at the same time well beyond them. Both Houghton and af Klint had the idea that their artistic work was the carrier of a new religious revelation. It can be understood to possess, in this sense, messianic or millennialist qualities. Houghton, from a Christian spiritualist perspective, referred to a “Third Dispensation,” which can be understood as the new revelation of spiritualist movement as a whole, in which her drawings were supposed to play a prominent role (Houghton 1881: v–vi). This would usher a new spiritual age of harmony and peace, clearly inspired by the millenarian model of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202), the medieval Italian monk whose work was an important undercurrent in the religious history of Europe, and received new enthusiastic attention in alternative spiritual milieus in the nineteenth century.²⁸ Similarly, af Klint mentioned in her notebooks her intention to write a “fifth gospel” (Svensson 2005: 23).

The messianic aspect of Houghton’s and af Klint’s work is made even more evident by the fact that it is perceived by them to be a message sent by invisible personal agencies—spiritual “guides” or “masters”—who play a crucial role in a scheme of cosmic evolution. This aspect, which features so prominently in Houghton and af Klint, seems to be much less visible in Kunz. As I have already pointed out, the starting point for Kunz’s visual work usually seems to be merely contingent, in relation to a particular situation or problem. Her visual work can later be used again in another context, where it acquires a new, broader meaning, but Kunz did not claim to receive it from higher beings as a message of universal value.

Another significant difference is that both Houghton and af Klint, unlike Kunz, left a considerable amount of textual, interpretive material about their own visual works. This material is different in the cases of Houghton and af Klint, at least in the form in which it reached us. In fact, Houghton published much of this material in her books, whereas af Klint

²⁸On the influence of Joachimism in nineteenth-century Britain, see Gould and Reeves (2002).

left it unpublished.²⁹ But it does offer an interesting view of how Houghton and af Klint looked at their respective works from their subjective perspectives. Kunz's voice, on the other hand, reaches us only indirectly, initially through the visual work itself, but then also through the persons who knew her personally and reported what her opinions and interpretations were.³⁰ Apart from that, she left no extensive written interpretation of her work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we have been able to see with the examination of these three women artists, there is a fascinating diversity in the types and motivations of esoteric posthumousness. Whereas for Houghton the situation of posthumousness seems to be verging more on the first type (inability), for af Klint and Kunz it seems to go towards the second (choice). As to motivations, whereas we find all three of them in af Klint (command by entities, projection into the future, and lack of interest in material gain), we find only the second and the third in Kunz. Houghton, after the disappointment of her 1871 exhibition, also came to the conclusion that the world was not ready yet for her message, which brought her close to the second motivation. This shows how complex the dynamics of esoteric posthumousness can be.

For us, living not only in a post-post-modern world, but also in a post-Marxian, post-Freudian, and post-Nietzschean one, there seems to be something "inauthentic" in the esoteric posthumousness of these artists, who were ready to accept relative obscurity and lack of recognition in spite of an immense talent that appears so evident to us today. But the point is that the projection of their work into the future of posthumousness is very probably not a contingent aspect, but one of the factors that allowed them to give full expression to their creativity. Precisely because they had a feeling that their art belonged to the future, and not to their own times, they could feel free to experiment and challenge the norms of the present.

²⁹ Houghton tells us a good deal about the way in which she produced her drawings, and her own understanding of them, in the catalogue of her 1871 exhibition and in her major autobiographical work, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*. See Houghton (1871, 1881, and 1882). As to af Klint, she left 124 unpublished notebooks comprising more than 20,000 pages of handwritten notes and sketches, which are essential for any interpretation of her artistic work. As indicated above, some of this material has begun to be published, also in English translation.

³⁰ See above, n. 25.

We are here very close to what the Marxian philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) defined as the “principle of hope” in his classic work on the subject: a principle allowing people to make revolutions that have very concrete social effects and political consequences in this material world, even when they make them for the sake of a spiritual or religious vision (Bloch 1986).

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